

Teaching Time-Creating Devices in Spontaneous Speech: A Focused-Learning Approach

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In teaching speaking skills in the L2 classroom, it is not enough merely to provide students with opportunities to speak in English. We need to help students to speak, and hence help them to learn to speak. In this article, I describe a series of activities designed specially to teach a speaking strategy. In particular, I focus on how a method that facilitates oral production, i.e., the use of time-creating devices, can be taught using the focused learning approach.

What are time-creating devices? They are devices that are used to gain time for the speaker so that he can formulate what to say next in spontaneous speech. They include: (1) fillers, e.g., well, actually, I mean, you know, let me see now, oh let me think, and (2) repetition of key words in one's interlocutor's utterance, e.g., A: When are you leaving? B: When am I leaving?

Rationale for Teaching Time-creating Devices in Speech

When participating spontaneously in class discussion or conversation, students need time to plan and organise their message while they are speaking. Inevitably they will use devices like fillers and repetition of words to gain time to speak. Very fluent students may not use these devices often and may find them of limited usefulness. However, for less fluent and less competent speakers, time-creating devices provide a valuable speaking strategy.

Less fluent students sometimes give the impression that they can produce only minimal responses because they use long pauses to gain time to think when speaking spontaneously. These pauses, often misinterpreted as the end of a turn in speaking, prevent them from holding the floor and cause them to lose the chance to go on speaking. The resultant impression is that the students are incompetent speakers who fail to contribute as much as is desirable to class discussion or spontaneous conversation.

Teaching time-creating devices is a way to help these less fluent students. If they know how to signal that they are planning their speech and have not finished their turn, this will enable them to speak more, and more effectively. Hieke (1981) and Crystal (1981) (quoted in Arevart and Nation 1991:91) suggest that fillers and hesitation markers are features of well-formedness that contribute to better-quality speech production. Nolasco and Arthur (1987:53) state that their use in speech can contribute to an impression of fluency.

Focused Learning

Having outlined the rationale for the teaching of time-creating devices, I shall now explain the term focused learning. Focused learning is a theory of how language can be learnt effectively in the classroom context. According to R. K. Johnson in a lecture given at the University of Hong Kong, focused learning is based on these six principles of learning:

1. Students learn best if objectives are clearly stated. If students know the objectives of a particular exercise or activity, they will perceive that the teaching programme has purpose and direction. This will overcome their resistance to learning.
2. Students benefit if complex tasks are broken down into their component elements.
3. Learning is a process by which students move from conscious knowledge to automatic performance (automatization). For this reason, consciousness-raising is an important technique in focused learning, which asserts that conscious, learned knowledge can be transformed into unconscious knowledge at some stage of the learning process.
4. Automatization requires practice. As Sharwood-Smith (1981:166) points out, "it is quite clear and uncontroversial to say that most spontaneous performance is attained by dint of practice."
5. Practice is most effective when the time spent is concentrated and attention focused.
6. Students benefit from explicit feedback that focuses on the learning objective and that leads to renewed learning experience.

Basically, the contrast between focused learning and unfocused acquisition corresponds to Krashen's distinction of learning and acquisition. Focused learning, as its name suggests, is a learning-based model. It is analytical in nature: exercises or tasks for teaching purposes are structured and incremental, and students learn one language item/skill after another. In contrast, unfocused acquisition is an acquisition-based model. It assumes that learning is naturalistic and holistic, and language items/ skills to be learnt are integrated in teaching tasks rather than separated.

Although different in nature, focused learning and unfocused acquisition should not be treated as mutually exclusive in an ELT curriculum. An acquisition-based model has a place in language development, but this model is not optimum. It needs to be supplemented by a learning-based model. In other words, both focused learning and unfocused acquisition play important roles in language-proficiency development.

Steps in Teaching Time-creating Devices

I shall describe how the principles of the focused-learning approach can be used to design a series of speaking activities to teach the use of time-creating devices. These activities are intended for intermediate students whose oral proficiency is below average.

Stage 1: Consciousness-Raising Activity

1. Choose a topic, e.g., friendship, and give an unprepared talk on it in class for about five minutes. Tape-record the talk.
2. Play the cassette tape to the whole class, pausing at places where fillers and repetition were used. Explain the use of these devices.
3. Explain that repetition and expressions like well and I mean are time-creating devices. Emphasize that their use does not result in “bad language” but helps people plan their speech and sound more natural.
4. List the main time-creating devices in English on the blackboard. Explain, step by step, how they are used in spontaneous speech. Tell the students not to use long pauses in discussions or conversations. Instead, when they need to plan what they will say next or search for a word, they should fill the gap by using fillers or repetition.

Rationale. The activity described in nos. 1 and 2 above is called “modeling think-aloud” (O’Malley and Chamot 1990:158). It raises students’ awareness of the strategy to be learned through giving a demonstration of how the teacher himself/herself uses the strategy.

The explanation of the rationale of the strategy and the naming of it help to develop students’ knowledge of time-creating devices.

Stage 2: Practice Activity

1. Select an audio tape of a talk or a group discussion where one or more students speak spontaneously. The talk or discussion should contain long pauses.
2. Play the tape to the students, asking them what is wrong with the talk or discussion.
3. Provide each student with a transcript of the talk or discussion. Remind them of the time-creating devices used in English.
4. Have students form pairs and ask them to improve the talk or discussion on the tape by using time-creating devices. Students practise saying their improved versions of the talk or discussion by speaking to each other.
5. Go round the class and listen to students. Provide support and give further explanation if these are needed.

Rationale. This controlled activity aims to give students confidence and support in the use of time-creating devices.

Stage 3: Fluency Practice

1. Prepare a list of topics that are within the students' experience and that motivate them. For example:

school life	money
pleasures	food
holidays	sports
TV/movie stars	boyfriends/girlfriends
karaoke	personal experiences
concerts	TV games
fashion	part-time jobs

Write each topic on a small piece of paper. Fold all the pieces of paper and put them into a box.

2. Ask students to form pairs. In each pair, one student draws a piece of paper with a topic on it from the box. He does not show the topic to his partner, but he has to give an unprepared talk on it for about five minutes, during which time he cannot mention the words on the paper. In giving his talk, the student is encouraged to use a variety of time-creating devices. At the end of his talk, his partner guesses what the topic is.

3. Tape-record the talk of all the students.

4. Play the tapes to the whole class. Ask the speakers on the tapes individually to think aloud in front of the class, i.e., to verbalise their own thought processes while doing the task.

Rationale. This activity provides less controlled activities that enable students to use English for communication. Whereas in the last activity the teacher provides support while students practise, in this activity support is phased out to encourage autonomous strategy use. Jones et al. (1987) call this "scaffolding instruction."

The game-like nature of this activity increases students' motivation to practise speaking.

Students' performance is tape-recorded so that students can be asked to think aloud after the activity is over. The think-alouds enable the teacher to see how students use time-creating devices in spontaneous oral presentation. The recording can also be used as formative assessment of the students' progress.

Stage 4: Further Fluency Activity

1. Prepare the following two role cards:

Role A

You are the principle of a school that is

raising money to build a new library. You are going to attend a press conference next Monday, where you need to explain why a new library needs to be built in your school and how much money is needed. Write your speech and be ready to present it. The speech should last about 10 minutes.

Role A

You are a reporter attending a press conference where the principle of the school is describing his plan to build a new library in his school. You do not find this topic very interesting. Instead, you want to find out why so many high-school students have committed suicide recently. You have to leave the conference in 10 minutes, so you cannot wait for the principle to finish his speech before you ask your questions. Interrupt him and ask your questions now.

2. This activity is to be done in pairs. A week before class, give student A in each pair role card A so that he can prepare his speech beforehand.

3. Student B will be given role card B in class.

4. In pairs, students do the roleplay. Student A will begin by reading out his speech. Student B should not allow him to finish. Instead, he should ask student A questions that have answers student A has not thought about beforehand, e.g., “Is there really too much homework for students to do at school these days?” With very weak students, these questions may be prepared with the help of the teacher.

Rationale. This activity allows students to understand that in real-life communication, one sometimes has to answer unexpected questions. On these occasions, keeping silent in order to think of the answers is not an appropriate or effective strategy. Instead, time-creating devices like repeating one’s interlocutor’s question(s) may be employed.

The use of roleplay adds variety to the kinds of activities the students are asked to perform.

Stage 5: Feedback Activity for Students

1. Select audio tapes of students' oral work recorded before and after time-creating devices were taught. Prepare the following task sheet, adapted from Nolasco and Arthur (1987:134-36):
2. Give each student a tape of his oral work and a copy of the Task Sheet for Evaluation.
3. Have students evaluate their own performance.

Rationale. Students sometimes lose interest in participating in speaking activities because they fail to see their educational value. They feel that they are made to speak in English for the sake of doing it. They do not think that they have actually learned much. To counteract this feeling, feedback tasks should be incorporated into the speaking class. The feedback task described above allows students to listen to their oral performance before and after time-creating devices were taught. The comparison will help them to see the improvement they have made. As students feel a sense of satisfaction in their work, they will become motivated and will want further activities of a similar kind. This is beneficial as it leads to renewed learning experience.

Stage 6: Evaluation Activity for the Teacher

1. Listen to the students' tapes in stage 5.
2. Using the Task Sheet for Evaluation, evaluate how well students have learned time-creating devices in speech.

Rationale. This activity enables the teacher to evaluate his/her success in teaching time-creating devices.

Conclusion

Richards (1990:79-80) suggests that in designing a speaking program goals must be set, samples of which include how to use conversational fillers. In this article, I have described a series of activities that teach students how to use fillers and hesitation devices. These activities are designed with students' interests in mind. As they are interesting to students, they motivate the students to speak and to learn how to speak.

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